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SUBJECT: ELECTION THEMES: CONSULTATION, CONSENSUS, CHANGE

¶1. (SBU) Jandad Khan Spinghar, chief of the Afghan election observation organization FEFA, says that in the coming election campaign, people are looking for new leaders to address three challenges: corruption, security, and ethnic conflicts. As the head of an umbrella organization of 14 NGOs, Spinghar hears a spectrum of civil society views. What people want, he says, is change.

¶2. (SBU) "Every problem has its root in the weakness of the government," Spinghar laments. The administration and the legislature lack capacity, and this is key. On the problem of security, for example, if the government appeared honest and competent, and delivered results on reconstruction, it would receive the people's trust, and then their cooperation. This cooperation would increase support for government forces and reduce it for the violent alternatives. Instead the government is weak, and ends up looking at fault for poor security and even the deeply-unpopular coalition force civilian casualties. People think, says Spinghar, that a strong, honest, competent government would put a stop to these tragedies.

¶3. Likewise, after the problem of security, Spinghar believes the weak capacity of the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) is most likely to put voter registration and the 2009 presidential and provincial council elections at risk. FEFA's 20-page analysis of the IEC's earlier, pilot voter registration project is highly critical of the organization: weak capacity, limited public outreach, inadequate voter education, lackadaisical security. Spinghar sees some of the same problems in the offing now.

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CONSULTATION AND CONSENSUS  
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¶4. (SBU) In part reflecting frustration with weak institutions, on key issues Spinghar prefers addressing key issues through consultation and consensus rather than lively political competition. He is exasperated that, on the electoral law, the legislature has allowed itself to bog down in petty maneuvers to gain more seats for each faction. FEFA's carefully-researched case for changes to buttress the independence of the IEC and regulate campaign finance fell on deaf ears.

¶5. (SBU) Spinghar opposes the National Assembly's current

bid to require legislative approval of the President's choices for IEC Commissioners as well. With legislative approval, the "big political groups" would hold sway over the Commissioners and the electoral process. Rather, the President should solicit names from civil society groups, other political actors, and the international community, then himself choose from these lists.

16. (SBU) Spinghar is leery of consultations with traditional, tribal, and religious leaders, whom he believes are under the control of the "powerful commanders." Nonetheless, he faults the Karzai government for failing to "respect Afghan traditions." A Pashtun from Nangarhar who has long lived in Kabul, Spinghar combines advocacy for stronger roles for civil society and the international community with loyalty to Afghan political and social norms.

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